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# A sage course on Daniloff

While armchair quarterbacks berate President Reagan for a "Cartersque cave-in," he goes about settling a nettlesome spy squabble with restraint. His actions suggest two clear aims: to shield Nicholas Daniloff from harm, and to preserve whatever possibilities exist for a dialogue between two nations that are capable of ending human history.

From the first days of the crisis, Reagan has comported himself in a manner that appears cool, compassionate and clever. When Daniloff was framed and arrested by the KGB, the president held his tongue and explored the path of quiet diplomacy. Reagan went public only after the Soviets' stubborn campaign against Daniloff made it clear how serious they were about protecting their own accused spy, Gennady Zakharov.

Without threatening to break off preparations for a summit meeting, the president expressed the indignation felt by most Americans, and tried to insist upon a distinction between the two cases. This wish to distinguish the arrested American from the arrested Russian may be proper — certainly it is politically inevitable — but it has also led to a blinkered vision of the entire affair.

In their understandable fixation on the injustice done to Daniloff, some American reporters and officials have been asking the wrong questions. The Soviets' blatant efforts to create an artificial symmetry between the two cases represent standard procedure for the Kremlin. The transparency of the Politburo's ploy amounts to a signal that the Soviets do not seriously wish to convict Daniloff as a CIA agent, or scuttle the summit meeting.

The intended message from Moscow has to do with Zakharov, the UN employee without diplomatic immunity, who was being extensively interrogated in New York when Daniloff was arrested. Framing Daniloff was the Soviets' way of saying they will not tolerate American behavior that seems to break the established rules of the spy game.

The FBI, using an informant, had been stringing Zakharov along for more than three years. Though Zakharov finally paid for classified material, and though he was presumably accepting the informant's package for his government, the Soviet leadership had its own reasons for treating the case as a sting operation, and an unacceptable precedent.

The Kremlin might have ignored the stinging if Zakharov had been remanded to the custody of the Soviet ambassador after his arrest, in accordance with past practice. US officials failed — or refused — to respond to the Soviets' request; and after a week, the Soviets staged the tit-for-tat retaliation that has become their trademark.

The FBI's decision to pounce on Zakharov may have been made without regard to preparations for a summit meeting. The FBI may have acted without authorization from the administration, as the White House has since explained. The unprecedented detention of Zakharov might even have been due to a failure in communication between the State Department and the Justice Department, as the administration contends.

The confluence of these foul-ups, however, would have to seem suspicious to the Politburo. The Soviet leaders took Daniloff hostage to make Washington abide by the peculiar rules of the spook fraternity; to foil a propaganda campaign against Soviet personnel at the UN; and to protect KGB officers against a demoralizing precedent.

Reagan is right to say that the release of Daniloff and Zakharov to their respective ambassadors does not imply an equivalence of guilt. The president is wise to keep the Daniloff outrage from ruining superpower relations.

This is the course Daniloff himself has counseled, and it is the sage course. Those bellicose conservatives calling for Reagan to retaliate against the Soviets have never shown themselves more irresponsible.